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Parker for President

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By 1840 party allegiance had become a prominent factor in the outcome of elections in the Territory of Iowa. Men were supported more for their partisanship than because of their personal qualifications. In some communities rivalry between the Whigs and Democrats was keen. For example, Jonathan W. Parker was elected to the Territorial Council from Scott County in 1840 by a majority of only four votes over James Grant. The next year close contests were recorded in many districts. Thus, when the Fourth Legislative Assembly gathered in Iowa City at Butler's Capitol in December, 1841, there were sixteen Democrats and ten Whigs in the House of Representatives, and in the Council six Whigs opposed seven Democrats.

This narrow Democratic majority (although one of the Whigs, James Hall, had been detained by sleet and high water) resulted in a bitter controversy over the selection of the President of the Council. The Whigs decided in caucus to concentrate their support on a single candidate in the hope of winning the election. The Democrats, however, were on guard against division of their

ranks and prepared to nominate only one candidate. On the second day of the session, therefore, Councilman Edward Johnstone of Lee County nominated Jonathan W. Parker for the Democrats, while Francis Springer named Mortimer Bainbridge for the Whigs.

On the first ballot Parker received six votes, Bainbridge gathered four tallies, while one ballot was blank and one was marked for George Greene, a Democrat. Since a majority of all members of the Council was necessary to elect, no one had received the requisite number of votes. The voting was secret, and so it is impossible to determine certainly who voted for Greene and who left his ballot blank. Assuming that the alignment of members was strictly partisan, one of the odd votes was cast by a Democrat and the other by a Whig. If Parker voted for Greene he acted contrary to the Democratic caucus pledge to support himself. Perhaps he cast the blank ballot. If so, who voted for Greene? Maybe the Whig candidate, Bainbridge, reluctant to vote for himself, had cast a vote for a Democrat in the hope of dividing his opponents on the second ballot between Parker and Greene. That alternative does not seem entirely probable, however, because Bainbridge was extremely partisan. On a later occasion his Whig loyalty led him to make a fistic

attack upon the editor of the Democratic *Capitol Reporter*.

When the Democrats failed to elect a President on the first ballot, the Whigs attempted to delay the decision, probably in the hope of stimulating dissention among the Democrats and thus gaining a temporary balance of power. Francis Springer, one of the tellers, moved to adjourn until the next morning. The Council, however, promptly voted seven to five against it. The division was on strictly party lines. Mr. Springer then proposed that the election of a President be postponed until the next day. If the Whigs could gain time for negotiation, they might be able to persuade some of the Democrats to compromise on a more acceptable candidate than Parker. Perhaps the lone vote for Greene pointed toward such a compromise. Indeed, some of the Whigs might have hoped to win enough Democratic votes to elect Bainbridge.

Again, however, the Council refused to delay the election of a presiding officer. This vote was eight to four, J. S. Kirkpatrick, joining the Democrats in defeating Springer's motion. He may not have been a very ardent Whig, for he had been appointed to act as a teller in the election. Though the temporary President, Jesse B. Browne, was a Whig, he would scarcely have selected another

teller as positively identified with Whig interests as Springer. Kirkpatrick represented the same district as Bainbridge, and therefore might have been expected to support his colleague for territorial as well as partisan reasons.

On the second ballot for President the result was exactly the same as on the first — six for Parker, four for Bainbridge, one for Greene, and one blank. The Democrats were steadfast in their support of Parker, yet he still lacked one vote of being elected. His feelings may be imagined as he gazed at the bright new walls of Butler's Capitol and contemplated his political opportunity. Perhaps his future career in politics would depend upon the result of the next ballot. To vote for himself did not seem to comport with parliamentary etiquette. But if he refrained from casting the decisive ballot in his own favor he and his party might lose the coveted office.

The members of the Council wrote their choices on a third ballot. The tellers began their count — one for Bainbridge — one for Parker. There was a hush of expectancy in the Council chamber. The tabulation was soon completed. Jesse Browne rose to announce the decision. Seven votes for Parker, four for Bainbridge, and one for Greene. Jonathan W. Parker was conducted to the President's platform.

To some, the inaugural remarks of the new presiding officer seemed a little ironical. *"Gentlemen"*, he said, "I tender you my most sincere and grateful acknowledgments for this flattering testimony of your confidence in me. Entrusted, by you, with so honorable and so responsible a station, it becomes my duty, and, I assure you, it will be my pleasure to exert my utmost powers to discharge its duties faithfully, promptly and impartially." Referring to the potential greatness of the Territory, he observed that the members of the legislature had a solemn responsibility to promote the general happiness and prosperity. "I doubt not you will meet it like men, and act not for yourselves, but for the welfare of the whole people."

The incident, however, was not closed. Whig partisans protested that the Democrats, and particularly Parker, had acted unscrupulously. Whereas, Councilman Bainbridge had voted for some one else, apparently for Greene, Parker had refrained from voting at all on two ballots and then elected himself to the office of President.

"It is with deep mortification and regret," wrote William Crum in the Iowa City *Standard,* "that we are called upon as impartial journalists, to record the humiliating action of the present Legislature. Never since the establishment of our

Government, or the incorporation of social order, by conventional arrangement, in an intelligent and enlightened community, has there been a greater disregard to the feelings of men, or the principles of party, in any State or Territory, than has been manifested in the recent action of our Territorial Legislature. To accomplish the object of a *midnight caucus,* an honorable member of the Council, so far surrendered his claims to respect, as to *vote for himself,* to secure the office of President of the Council." The dictatorial action of the Democratic caucus was commensurate with the activities of the "Star-Chamber" and the "doings of the Jacobins of the French Revolution". And because of the caucus action, continued Editor Crum, "not one Whig has been elected to any office by this Legislature".

In order to support his condemnation, Crum cited Jefferson's *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* and concluded that if "Mr. Parker has the feelings of an honorable man, we are at a loss to know how he must have felt — knowing, that he voted for himself. In the language of Mr. Jefferson, he has violated the laws of *'Decency'* and a 'fundamental principle of the social compact' ".

But President Parker's action was not without defenders. Ver Planck Van Antwerp of the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* pointed out that the voting had

been by secret ballot and so the members who actually voted for Parker could not be known. Speaking of "the modern Cato" of the *Standard,* "the organ *par excellence* of Whiggery", Editor Van Antwerp insisted that the action of the Council was merely the result of "the maneuvers of the 'Whig' members to *embarrass"* the Democratic majority. He acknowledged that the "seven Democratic members being a majority of the body, had agreed among themselves that one of their number, *and not one of their opponents, who constituted the minority,* should be the presiding officer of the body; and the five others, *composing that minority,* had determined apparently, to thwart them in the effort."

The editor of the *Capitol Reporter* declared that Jonathan W. Parker had pursued a course of *"moral courage and firmness"* and had not acted for mere self-gratification nor to appease fellow members of the Council. Instead, insisted Editor Van Antwerp, he had comported "IN CONFORMITY WITH A SOLEMN DUTY WHICH HE OWED TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY THROUGHOUT THE TERRITORY; every true member of which, had he been present, would sternly have DEMANDED IT OF HIM, rather than have witnessed the thwarting of a majority by a stubborn and factious minority."

The history of the legislative session in Butler's Capitol gives no evidence that President Parker acted with prejudice or displayed favoritism. Nor does his career indicate that he was other than a man of sincerity and honesty. In 1841 he was thirty-one years old, a lawyer by profession, a botanist in avocation, a pioneer by nature, and a politician with considerable experience.

Born in Vermont, one of seven children, Jonathan W. Parker soon migrated to Pennsylvania with his parents Jonathan and Naomi Parker. After studying law under Judge Kidder of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, he decided in the autumn of 1836 to seek his fortune near Galena, Illinois. Probably he was lured westward by the opportunity of success in the lead region.

When the young prospector neared his destination the boat upon which he had taken passage from St. Louis became ice bound at Davenport. Attracted by the beauty of Scott County, he decided to make that place his home. At once he became a leader in community and Territorial affairs. According to an early historian, Parker was the orator of the day at the first Fourth of July celebration held at Davenport in 1837. He was admitted to the bar by Judge Joseph Williams at the first term of the Iowa Territorial district court held in Davenport on October 4, 1838.

At the first general election in the Territory of Iowa, Jonathan W. Parker was chosen to represent Scott and Clinton counties in the Council of the First Legislative Assembly. He was a member of the Judiciary Committee which coöperated with the Justices of the Supreme Court in drawing up a code of laws for the Territory. When the question of the executive veto was raised, Parker was strongly opposed to Governor Lucas.

The death of Secretary William B. Conway early in November, 1839, placed upon Jonathan W. Parker and J. M. Robertson the melancholy duty of accompanying the Secretary's body to Davenport on the steamboat *Ione*. In January, 1840, Parker's name appears prominently in the list of Democrats who signed a call for a constitutional convention. Later that year his constituency elected him to a second term in the Territorial Council. But Parker's interest was not confined to politics because in November, 1841, he was elected to the vestry of Davenport's "Trinity Church Parish".

In local affairs Jonathan W. Parker was popular. "He held at various times" the offices of justice of the peace and judge of probate. In April, 1840, he was chosen a town trustee with George L. Davenport, Seth F. Whiting, John Forest, and William Nichols. And, according

to an early account, he was elected mayor of Davenport for the next year.

Thus, Jonathan W. Parker had achieved some political distinction and won popular favor when the Iowa City newspapers engaged in a battle of words over his being elected President of the Council in 1841. Through the legislative months the *Standard* continued its attacks upon the Democratic majority. And with equal insistence the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* praised "the true Democrats" and advocated "the execution of the Whigs". At the conclusion of the session, Editor Van Antwerp wrote that "Rarely has it happened, we imagine, that such general satisfaction has been given by presiding officers, as that which has resulted from the manner in which Generals Parker, and Lewis, have presided over the two houses of our Legislature".

Jonathan W. Parker left Davenport in 1844. After traveling extensively in various parts of the United States and studying medicine intensively as a profession, he began practice in Cincinnati, Ohio. But when the specter of cholera cast its shadow over the country he fell a victim to its ravages in the fall of 1850, dying at the home of Dr. Gatchel, "much lamented for his many social and moral virtues."

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